



# Iowa's Nymphs, Naiads, & Graces

## Performing Delsarte for the Masses

by Marian Wilson Kimber

Iowans have loved Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* ever since it became a hit on Broadway in 1957. We are happy to identify with the "Iowa stubborn" residents of River City, the fictional town based on Mason City, where the author and composer grew up. Willson's early career included a stint playing flute under the baton of John Philip Sousa, and his musical celebrates great American music: marching bands ("76 Trombones") and barber-shop quartets ("Lida Rose"). But one part of Willson's imaginative reconstruction of turn-of-the-century cultural life is largely forgotten today. The show's con-artist hero, Professor Harold Hill, counters the resistance of the mayor's wife to his sales strategy by declaring her fidgety feet to bespeak "Delsarte" and by inviting her to chair a ladies' auxiliary on the "classic dance." Where did Willson get the idea for Eulalie MacKecknie Shinn and her entourage of less-than-graceful ladies posing as "Grecian urns"?

The Delsarte system was a popular activity for women before the World War I era. It was named for a French singer, actor, and teacher, François Delsarte, even though it was largely an American invention. Described as "physical culture," Delsarte was part pantomime, part exercise, and part self-help, promising women new levels of grace, fitness, and beauty.

When it became a fad in the 1880s and '90s, the word "Delsarte" was applied to everything from poetry anthologies to women's corsets. But the activity most closely associated with the term was the practice of posing, gowned in robes so as to resemble Greek statues, sometimes wearing white makeup to suggest actual marble statuary. The subjects of Delsarte

performances were frequently Greek female characters and also included figures from the Bible and myths. Books and magazines provided instructions for women to learn to pose in tableaux that depicted "The Death of Virginia," "The Niobe Group," or "Dance of the Muses." In an era in which a respectable woman did not dare become a morally suspect actress, posing in Delsarte tableaux must have felt tremendously liberating. In fact, Delsarte had some influence

on modern dance, even though most of the first performers were elocutionists, specializing in performing poetic recitations as well as posing.

If he had wanted to see Delsarte, young Meredith Willson wouldn't have had far to look. Between the late 1880s and 1920, Delsarte performances took place in over 50 different Iowa communities, from cities like Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, and Waterloo, to tiny villages, such as Ireton and Pomeroy. Professional elocutionists who toured elsewhere in the state included



In *The Music Man*, the mayor's wife and friends depict Grecian urns in the Delsarte style.





R. Anna Morris, who performed and taught across Iowa, published *Physical Education in the Public Schools* in 1892. The book demonstrates expressing emotions in Delsarte, as well as executing dumbbell and Indian club exercises. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

statue-posing in their repertoire, but most Delsarte exhibitions were put on by amateurs like the ladies of the fictional River City: women's clubs, church groups, and high school and college students. In 1894, Mason City's Delsarte ensemble consisted of 24 young ladies who rehearsed at the Methodist church. Staged in local opera houses or school auditoriums, Delsarte performances were often for the benefit of a worthy cause, such as the local library or hospital.

Publicity sometimes provided assurances that the program would be educational: the Grecian Art Festival held in Cedar Rapids in 1904 to benefit St. Luke's Hospital was "not only a charming affair, but an entertainment with an instructive thread." Before their 1891 event, the Des Moines Women's Club printed the 17 tableaux titles in the newspaper, so that audience members who were "rusty" on Grecian art could study up beforehand. The article also noted that the beautiful young ladies planning to pose would be "positively adorable" in their Grecian gowns: "Dangerous as simple American girls, they will be deadly as nymphs, naiads and graces."

Grecian gowns became standard attire for many kinds of performances. In 1919 at their senior recital, oratory students at Upper Iowa University in Fayette pantomimed to Oscar Wilde's "The Rose and the Nightingale," read by Olive Caudle and accompanied by piano music.

Traveling Delsarteans were available to assist local groups of women who wished to present a public program. For example, women of the Baptist church in Anita engaged Detroit elocutionist Evelyn Allen Aitchison to direct their 1892 entertainment. Newspapers were filled with notices placed by female instructors who were "organizing a class for ladies." Teachers undertaking such a career must have developed the charm of a Professor Harold Hill in order to inspire enough enthusiasm to generate their employment. After a number of weeks of practice, the class would present its performance, and its instructor would then move on to introduce Delsarte to another community. In 1892, members of the Art Society of Mount Pleasant



UPPER IOWA UNIVERSITY (FAYETTE, IOWA), *THE PEACOCK* YEARBOOK, 1919



studied for several weeks with R. Anna Morris of the Des Moines public schools. They then gave a "closing exhibition" at Saunders' Opera House for a good-sized crowd.

Training for Delsarte was also offered at the numerous schools of oratory associated with Iowa's colleges, and at many of these schools women's literary societies sponsored public exhibitions with tableaux. Delsarte was frequently part of high school gymnasium programs as well. The 200 girls dressed in white who marched into their places at a Cedar Rapids high school display in 1896 were described by the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* as "a vision of beauty, youth and purity."

Meredith Willson was not the first author to satirize women engaged in Delsarte—ladies decked out in Grecian gowns were an easy target for humorists in the 1890s as well as the 1950s. Some men thought women should be attending to their housework instead of trying to embody great classical art. More than one commentator suggested that women could get plenty of exercise cleaning instead: "After a woman has crawled over and under all of the down-stairs furniture and skated down a winding

staircase, with a dusting cap tilted rakishly over her left eye, she will not feel like paying \$4 an hour for a set of Delsarte exercises." Iowa newspapermen reprinted many tongue-in-cheek remarks about statue-posing from other papers, but when it came to their own wives and daughters, they were quick to find such displays visually stunning and well worth seeing. Audiences in smaller towns were usually grateful for the entertainment. After the performance of Miss Thompson of Tabor College, the *Malvern Leader* wrote that the people of Tabor "seldom witness an exhibition of this kind and should be duly thankful."

In *The Music Man*, the climax of feminine artistic endeavor comes at the ice cream sociable. Unlike their historical predecessors, who took on the roles of powerful goddesses from Greek myth, the ladies of River City pose as Grecian urns—merely the receptacles on which such characters were painted. Not only are Mrs. Shinn's ladies well past the flower of their youth, they are far from achieving the grace and beauty that was supposed to be embodied in Delsarte. And given that the musical is set in 1912, just as Delsarte was fading from Iowa, their introduction of the art of posing to River City comes just a bit too late.

The next time you watch *The Music Man*, however, you can envision the young women in Iowa's history whose own poses helped contribute to Meredith Willson's delightful story. Just like the culturally ambitious citizens of River City, the women who performed Delsarte experienced excitement and a sense of pride in their role in the creation of the performing arts. Delsarte may be long gone, but a true appreciation of music and theater remains in the heart of Iowa communities. ♦

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**Well-loved songs, especially hymn tunes, were the most frequent musical accompaniment for posing. Here, students perform "Nearer My God to Thee" at Leander Clark College in Toledo, 1911.**



LEANDER CLARK COLLEGE (TOLEDO, IOWA), CARDINAL YEARBOOK, 1911





In 1908, Cornell College's Alethean Society gave a "public" centered on the poetry of Longfellow. In the crowning event of the evening, the students' poses expressed "The Famine" from *Hiawatha*, spoken by Lois Poyneer (far left). The *Cornellian* called it "one of the best things ever seen on the auditorium platform" and commented on the striking effect of the semi-dark room with only the "soft red glow" of the footlights.



The Lowell Literary Society of Penn College's Academy in Oskaloosa performs the popular Delsarte drill "Revel of Naiads" in 1913. The tableau would have been accompanied by slow waltz music.

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Descriptions of Delsarte performances appear in Iowa newspapers, circa 1889–1920, and photos appear in college yearbooks, circa 1908–1919. The 1891 Des Moines Women's Club performance is documented in its minutes, scrapbook, and newspaper transcriptions at Hoyt Sherman Place. Delsarte manuals by Iowans are R. Anna Morris's *Physical Education in the Public Schools* (New York: American Book Company, 1892) and E. B. Warman's *Gestures and Attitudes* (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1892).

Publications on which women from Iowa might have drawn for their performances include: Florence A. Fowle Adams, *Gesture and Pantomimic Action*, 4th ed. (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1897); *Tableaux mouvants and poses plastiques*, no. 1, by Clara Power Edgerly, and no. 2 by Margaret Virginia Jenkins (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1891 and 1906); Grace Faxon, *Popular Recitations and How to Recite Them* (Dansville, New York: F. A. Owen, 1909); and Stanley Schell, *Hiawatha Entertainments* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1901).

Modern scholarship on the Delsarte movement includes Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999) and, edited with Thomas Leabhart, *Essays on François Delsarte*, as the 2004–2005 issue of *Mime Journal*. Issues surrounding Delsarte and women are discussed in Taylor Susan Lake, "American Delsartism and the Bodily Discourse of Respectable Womanliness" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 2002); and Judy Burns, "The Culture of Nobility/The Nobility of Self-Cultivation," in *Moving Words: Rewriting Dance*, edited by Gay Morris (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Manuscript annotations and a list of additional secondary sources are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

